

Bulletin of the Government Museum, Chennai

# **TREATMENT OF FEMININE FORM IN INDIAN ART**

(International Women's Association Endowment Lecture-4)



**Dr. Choodamani Nandagopal, Ph.D.,**

Professor and Head of Academics, Chitrakala Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore

New Series-General Section Vol. XVI No.1

Commissioner of Museums,  
Government Museum, Egmore, Chennai-600 008.  
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Dr. R. KANNAN, Ph.D., I. A. S.

Commissioner of Museums  
Government Museum,  
Egmore, Chennai-600 008

Phone : {  
    OW : 82615784  
    Res : 4341299  
    Fax : 8218735

## FOREWORD

Worship of the female in the form of Goddess Shakthi is peculiar of Indian culture, which survive as an unbroken link from the Protohistoric past to the present. This is unique to Indian culture and civilisation in the whole world. This bulletin has been brought out especially on the occasion of the 4<sup>th</sup> lecture in the International Women's Association Endowment Lecture Series. This lecture delivered by Dr. Choodamani Nandagopal, an eminent art historian of international repute deals with the treatment of Feminine Form in Indian Art. Woman in her various shades and situations is adopted (as the most favoured theme) by Indian artists of all times from the Pre and Protohistoric period to the present modern age. The bronze figure of Mother Goddess from the Adichanallur prehistoric site in the Southern part of Tamilnadu and the Dancing Girl figurine from the Indus site in the North-west India are the oldest specimens both for the ancient metal craft and art theme. Heinz Mode, the German Indologist in the introduction of his book on Indian Art stresses this point by describing Indian Art as "a mirror of Indian Femininity". This line of thought is well elaborated by Dr. Choodamani Nandagopal in her lecture. Her lecture is an introductory and scholarly survey of Indian Art from its origin to its present state.

We thank Dr. Choodamani Nandagopal for providing the manuscript and line sketches prepared by her student, well in advance to enable us to release the bulletin simultaneously at the time of her lecture. We also thank the International Women's Association, which has created the Endowment Fund to arrange this type of academic pursuits and Mrs. Pat Alter, the wife of U. S. Consul for the keen interest shown by her in her capacity as a representative of International Women's Association.

We are sure that this bulletin will be a valuable addition to the library of Indian Art lovers.

*Raman*

Commissioner,  
Archaeology and Museums,  
Government of Tamilnadu,  
Chennai-600008.





## **Treatment of Feminine Form in Indian Art**

**'INDIAN ART CULMINATES IN THE REPRESENTATIONS OF FEMININITY' – Stella Kramarisch.**

When we take a cursory look at the sculptures and paintings that have been created from the pre-historic times to contemporary times it is quite obvious to agree with the opinion expressed by the renowned art historian Stella Kramarisch. It is true that at any given point of time Indian art is expressed with a higher emphasis on the depiction of female figures. The feminine form has caught the interest of the artist as well as the spectator through the annals of history. They do not cease to get weary in creating or viewing the female form in all its manifestation.

The thinking process basically involves two major components, the images and words. Images serve as the most powerful mode of communication than the words. The images occupy the domain of the visual language and the words take the role of explaining in the world of literature. 'Form and Content' are the two primary requisites of creative expression. In the visual arts the content is expressed in the graphic manner, which is treated as visual form whereas in literature the semiotics acts as form to express the content. Whether the form is treated with figures or words, they are the most fundamental and expressive tools of the imagination of an artist or a writer. At times both are unconsciously operative in the creative process of artistic expression.

Before arriving at 'form' the 'idea' takes its place in the process of imagination. This will transform into a concept and the concept pervades into tangible forms. The mind of the artist starts visualising infinite forms and when he really gets to work, he begins to transcend the concept that he had visualised into concrete form. He prepares number of sketches, makes combination of juxtaposing human forms with inanimate forms or with forms in nature. Now he treats his transcended form in a passionate manner. Thus 'form' and its emergence is the internalised and personalised experience of an artist while he is in the process of creating a work of art. For artist fidelity the form in all its manifestation matter the most. The conceiving of the form is a spiritual phenomenon; the treatment of a form is a technical evocation where the artist is completely involved. The Indian aesthetic theory has evolved with a definite process of creativity in the form of work of art for a painter or a sculptor. The creative ability of an artist very much lies in how he treats his forms in a significant manner.

To embellish his form he uses decorative treatment, to bring serenity in his forms he may take up divine approach, to beautify the form he would search

parallels in nature, to get a vicarious pleasure he would distort the form or to obtain an empowering form he would exaggerate the normal form by filling the strength and vigour. There are certain ways in which the artist transforms the imaginative forms he had visualised into tangible form through the aesthetic treatment.

In the painting the form is flat and the lines delineate the form whereas in sculptural art the form emerges with three-dimensional effect. The independent sculptures in the sense of a statue, celebrating the feminine form is seldom found in Indian historical period. The feminine figures are well positioned on the units of temple architecture. The architectural space is intelligently utilised for depicting various sorts of imagery, mirroring the significant place assigned for the female figures. This is one of the striking features of Indian civilization symbolising the outlook in a refined manner. Goethe's observation in this regard supports this view point, he puts it this way – Surely nowhere in the world than in India can women be better entitled to claim higher rank than men in art, whether through the quantity of representations, the quality of their execution or the importance of their symbolic content. Although the majority of Indian artists have been men, one could almost speak of Indian art as a 'female' art, because all the three factors mentioned above apply here and serve to indicate its character'.

#### **Feminine form – the Literary perceptions**

The concept of beauty is well defined in literature. The basis of Indian literature other than the *vedantic* type is the interpretation of naturalism, which transforms in the representation of feminine form. The poet experiences the aesthetic delight by transforming his felt feelings and perception of nature into the process of objectification and this objectification goes without saying in the conceptualisation of feminine form. It is believed that the most refined aspect of any expression, which is touched, with the enduring imagery of woman in the artistic creation.

Such forms are by no means peculiar to India, but as a remarkable illustration of the continuity of Indian culture that the old and spontaneous conception of fruitfulness and beauty as inseparable qualities has survived through later artistic evolutions where it explains and therefore justifies the expansive and voluptuous warmth of the characteristically femininity of Indian literature and sculpture. (Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, 'Early Indian Terracottas', Bulletin of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston – Vol XXV, 1927 pp – 90) Thus literature whether folk or classical is full in praise of the charms of woman and this portrayal is reflected in painting, sculptures, and vice versa. The artistic experience as evidenced in mural or miniature paintings or sculptures created in different periods are novel, extraordinary, and essentially blissful.

Literature and art are the two expressive faces of Indian ethos. The characters such as Sita, Yashodhara or Sundari stand as grand examples for the ideal types that find distinctive place in the world of art and literature. If Sita who

willingly followed her husband Rama to face the hardships throughout her life. Yashodhara preferred to stay at home and nourished the child in the role of a responsible mother and the queen she awaited the day to take the path trodden by her husband Buddha whereas Sundari as a beautiful queen would cast spell over the mind of Nanda and tried to dispel his path to spirituality. Women here take the position of causing delusion or evil in society. Such references occur in a large number in Indian literary content.

The literature written under the influence of tantricism, the *tantrika* ideal union of Shiva and Shakti (in Shakta and Shaiva schools), Pragya and Upaya, or their variants (in Buddhist schools of *Mantrayana*, *Sahajayana* and *Vajrayana*), Radha and Krishna (in *Goudiya Vaishnavism*), Sita and Rama (in *Rasika* school), Lakshmi and Narayana (in *Sriyaishnavism*) gave equal, if not more importance to female principle. *Shakti* in this view presents self-critical consciousness, dynamism, creativity, grace and *ananda* (rapture, bliss). Various forms of *Bhakti* movement also partake the character of tantricism. There is enormous literature, particularly devotional in Sanskrit, which is inspired by the *tantrik* view of pre-eminence of female principle of equality with male principle. (R.C.Dwivedi, 'Women in Classical Sanskrit Literature', - Women Images, ed by Pratibha Jain and Rajan Mohan Rawat Publications, New Delhi – 1996 P – 48)

### **Feminine form – Cultural perception**

The Condition of women in Indian culture reveals a peculiar amalgam, which represents the unique intermitting of low legal status, ritual contempt, sophisticated sexual partnership and object of deification.

In a civilization that has spawned, accepted, and revered the cult of shakti through its most recorded history, an overwhelming proportion of women remain powerless victims, unthinking collaborators or simply mute witnesses to a wide variety of inhuman practices being perpetrated against helpless women such as bride burning, dowry deaths, female infanticide and occasionally, even *sati* which are persisted till the present day. At the same time, however, consistency and continuity have characterized the evolution of Indian culture, especially in the sphere of social institutions such as *varna*, *jati* and family, which have manifested a significant bearing on the establishment, and determination of gender in Indian society. Consequently, the normative model or image of Indian womanhood has displayed rather remarkable consistency and ubiquity, although intervening historical process involving socio-religious and politico-economic considerations despite changes have significantly influenced and shaped the treatment of femininity in different periods.

While acknowledging that there is no universally applicable image of archetypal Indian women and that the images of women have undergone numerous changes and subtle innovation, certain basic motifs and models have enjoyed a sustained existence and have won wide social acceptance and even



approval. Among the most dominant motifs is the notion of the *pathivratha*, the devoted and virtuous wife. Since marriage is regarded as the noblest avocation and the "true" destiny of India women, there is an enormous emphasis on the cultural ideal of faithful and uncomplaining wifehood. Thus, the *pathivratha* regards it as her *soubaghya* (good fortune and well being which is however, contingent upon having living husband) to willingly suffer all kinds of adversities and privations for the sake of her husband and accepts service (*sewa*) to her spouse, parents-in-law and other members of her conjugal family as her basic general duty (*sithridharma*).

Closely associated with the notion of the *pathivratha* is the image of glorified mother-hood. The positive estimation of the mother's role in Indian mythology, folklore, political ideology and everyday family life is so well established that it requires little elucidation. Thus, as a life giver and protector of her children, the mother has been elevated to a very high position in *Hindu* sacred texts and her offsprings, especially sons, are asked to give their total respect and devotion to her. Throughout India the very idea of motherhood is accorded enormous reverence and it is usually believed to be role of great spiritual power and potency. As a matter of fact, the image of divine motherhood represents, in most Hindu philosophical System. The idea of universal or cosmic energy (*shakti*) is an energy that not only creative but also can be both, destructive and sustaining.

### **Feminine form – Indian art**

Indian art is a mirror of Indian femininity. Even a superficial observer will realize this when he looks at the subjects of the sculptures and paintings. One cannot fail to notice the large number of female figures or the pleasantly plump and charmingly feminine forms. Combining in her attitudes and her gestures natural beauty with the most refined achievements of civilization, the Indian women symbolizes the Indian outlook upon life. (The Woman in Indian Art by Heinz Mode, P.8) This may be observed all through history from the small bronzes and terracottas of the Harappa civilization of the third and second millennium B.C famed for the large number and sometimes also for the beauty of the female figures to the works of the modern times.

Woman is associated with the concept of 'Bhoomi', 'dharani', the earth. The Specific qualities are the utmost tolerance of bearing load or forgiving the one who tramples her. The female form is epitomised with this concept and she is the symbol of eternal sacrifice. Vishnu takes different forms to protect her and lifts her from the shackles. It is so natural for an Indian woman to imbibe these in her grooming.

The naturalism of India stresses in the representation of women, the well-developed and charming plumpness of the female body, it's swelling surface, soft

to the touch, and the grace of gestures, which, although natural, are yet conditioned by civilizing influences. One of the interesting antecedents is the emergence of female form in dancing mode. Dancing is a characteristic of Indian art, and it is not by chance that it is closely related to the art of sculpture. Dance and sculpture are two different and distinctive arts used as vehicles to express human emotions and aesthetic achievement. But both the arts have chosen female form as the means of exposition. The *rasa* theory is common to dance and sculpture. Evoking the aesthetic delight is the ultimate aim of a dancer and a sculptor. The sporadic outbreak of temple during medieval times exploited to the maximum these dual art forms for a common purpose.

The willingness from the artists to introduce large number of dance sculptures provided immense scope to conceive the images of free movements, which embellished the medieval religious structures. They created damsels in attractive poses instead of the stereotyped icons with fewer differences in attributes and features. This also avoided the repletion of icons and the ornate temples further used the female dancing images in all possible ways. The institution of temple dancing from the earliest times perhaps inspired the sculptors to treat the female figures in a dancing mode and expression. In the *Natya-mantapa* or the dancing hall, the danseuses of the temple regularly conducted dance in the evening as a part of temple ritual. They have crystallised the contemporary forms of dancing through the enchanting images. The infinite gestures and artistic bodily movement of these dancers have found a place of eminence in the precinct of the temples and the sculptors treated their feminine form with utmost care and dignity. Here too femininity dominates the content of the art and the way its meaning and its specific beauty are shown, even when it is a man who organizes the dance or where dancing couples or larger groups are to be seen; there too the substance of the dance is concentrated on the female figure.

Any study of the iconography of women in Indian art has to distinguish between two main groups: one, the woman as celestial figure, goddess, demi-goddess, or demon, and two, the woman as earthly figure. In the earlier periods of Indian art the images belonging to the first group by far outnumbered those of the second, since the majority of Indian figures come from sacred buildings, whereas secular buildings with figurative decorations have been preserved only from comparatively recent epochs. (The Woman in Indian Art by Heinz Mode, P.11)

Bearing this in mind one may call the picture of a goddess symbolic; abide by formal rules of a religious canon. A large number of bodily attitudes and expressive gestures of the limbs (*bhargas* and *mudras*) may be observed as three important groups of distinctive characteristics: first, the contemplative, quietly poised attitude (*sattva*), second, the representative disposition emphasizing power and strength (*rajas*); and third, the lively temperament exhibiting the might and force of the goddess by her gestures which indicate destructive and bellicose

activities (*tamas*). The three postures, sitting, standing and moving, seem organically well adapted to these three "virtues and attitudes" (*gunas*).

It would be difficult here to document and enumerate the Indian goddesses because their names alone would fill many pages religious texts. Prominent among them, Durga, known also as Parvati or Uma and often simply called the Great Goddess, Mahadevi. In her terrifying appearance she is known as Kali, Chamunda, and Chandi; she is the wife of Shiva. She is undoubtedly one of the most ancient, pre-Aryan deities of India. She is sometimes represented as a beautiful and blooming woman, sometimes as a frightening slut. All the characteristic qualities of the original mother-deity are concentrated in her: femininity and fertility as well as destructive violence, charm as well as terrifying cruelty. She has been set up as the divine ruler of the animal kingdom; on occasions she is represented alone and worshipped in temples of her own, at other times along with her husband Shiva and the children of this marriage, Ganesha and Kartikeya. Usually she rides a lion or a tiger, a detail of which would connect the goddess with the most ancient forms of the mother-deity of Asia Minor, that is, with the sculptures of clay or stone, dating from the sixth millennium B.C.

In the popular art of India this connection of the goddess with the tiger has been retained until now in the imagery of Mahishasuramardhini, Durga and Chamundi. The next place among the goddesses, second only to that of Durga, claimed by Lakshmi, the wife of Vishnu, has a certain individuality. She is called Sri, the goddess of fortune. Kama, the god of love, is her son; generally she is friendly and of a pleasing appearance. The third among the great goddesses is Sarasvati, the wife of Brahma, whose appearance in art is clearer than that of her husband. She might originally have been a local river-deity, but later became the goddess of speech and learning, and was particularly appreciated in literature. She alone seems to have nothing in common with the original mother-deity.

Far behind these three deities follow the wives of other Indian gods, Indrani, the wife of the ancient Aryan god-king Indra, or Aindri, or Savarna, Svati, and Maha-Virya, the wives of the sun god Surya; only a few representations are known of these goddesses. There was, however, one pair of deities very popular in art, the river-goddesses Ganga and Yamuna. Ganga is supposed to be the daughter of Himavat, the Himalaya, and the sister of Uma (Durga), while Yamuna was thought of as the daughter of the sun-god and the sister of Yama, the ruler of the realm of the dead. These latter two goddesses were frequently represented standing on their *vahanas*, the tortoise and the crocodile-like *makara*, at each side of the gates of the temple dating from the Gupta or the later epochs. They were worshipped as personifications of the sacred rivers represented by them; they had to ward off disaster and to protect the temple.

Some local goddesses of whom representations are to be found fairly often could also be mentioned here, for example, the snake-goddess Manasa, or Sitala, the small-pox-goddess mainly associated with Bengal, and Sashthi, the goddess of childbirth, and many others. Of prominent importance for art are numerous

groups of divine beings or demi-gods; for example, there are those who live in tress (*vrikshakas*) or those who dwell as female demons in woods or on mountains (*yakshinis* & *rakshasis*) who are much dreaded as cannibals. To them belong also the *apsaras* and *gandharvas*, who dance in the heaven of gods, and the magic *vidhyadharies*, the bird-like *kinnaris*, and the *naginis*, mermaidens.

At the *stupa* railings and gateways of Bharhut and Sanchi the *yakshinis* are turned into beautiful protectors of the sanctuaries; they are conspicuous of their bewitching nudity and bareness just like the still more charming Indian dryads hanging among the branches of the trees, who also form part of the stone imagery of Indian architecture. In the same way the figure of a woman standing by a tree, surrounding its trunk with her legs as with tendrils and reaching with her arms onto the foliage at the top is widely used as a symbol in the representation of woman. It represents, for example, the pregnant mother of Buddha, queen Maya, who gave birth to her child while standing at a tree in the grove of Lumbini.

Often the imagery of female forms stand as eloquent example of the creative unity of the religious and the secular spheres of figurative art revered in Indian society. In the early works of the Mathura school, dating from the Kushana period, the maidens standing at trees are represented in a definitely secular style so that the original theme of the images remains hidden to the present day observer. Since then it has become part of whatever an artist wanted to do, to show sense where lovely maidens are connected with trees.

Heavenly beauties, whose images are often to be found on the outer walls of mediaeval temples are pleasing to the eye, and offer the artist a choice of proving his ability in displaying overwhelming female charms in an aesthetic temperament. Here, the concept of femininity had liberated beyond the religious norms of the times. The background remained that of purposeful sacred art, but otherwise this is an instance of the fusion of the most ancient with quite modern views, forming the comprehensive basic rules of Indian art; in the introduction to the study it was termed "feminine"; it certainly is one of the most characteristic traits of Indian art.

It should perhaps be added that the figures of the principal woman are often surrounded by dwarf-like figures suggesting children, though with regard to the subject of the sense they might also be explained as *ganas*, that is, bands of dwarfs accompanying the gods.

The artistic value of the Indian representation of female deities is due to the originality of the design and to the fact that the message was generally applicable to all works of outstanding quality. Of course some of the images are prevented from attaining any far-reaching effects, notably those works which the Indian believer, as usually the Brahmin acting as the priestly mediator and ignoring the original intention of the artist, has hidden, or secreted by over-painting, or so clothed the figures that only some features of the face looks out



from a formless bundle. These represent endeavours to further a cult without images of any kind, where the mere presence of the deity is deemed sufficient, be it in a stone, in the form of a vessel, or in a formless bundle. Worship of that kind, though an important and interesting one from the religious point of view, is alien to the subject of this study.

Indian sculptures present various facets of the image of women in Indian society. They reveal the high position and esteem that she commanded in her various roles in society and the gradual retrogression in her position from a pursuer of knowledge, connoisseur of art and custodian of culture to a mere object of entertainment. This degeneration in the social image of women is reflected in the secular as well as religious sculptures during the eighth and the tenth century.

The secular sculpture directly projects the position of women and their various roles in the contemporary society; while the religious sculptures presents the reality in sublimated way. It relates the images of women to the past when they were originally conceived. One has to make a special effort to analyse social conditions from religious art for the religious significance of such artistic expressions makes an image sacred and shrouded in mysticism. The ancient art is the combination of the appearance of the reality. It means that it was not only a complete imitation of appearance but also the reflection of what things actually meant; the cause behind the appearance. Hence, Indian sculptures have many facets; they are religious and social, metaphysical and pragmatic, philosophical and ritualistic.

The different roles of women in society such as that of mother to those of a friend, guide and teacher of man, are emphasized and represented in the sculptures. Moreover, women is represented in the sculpture as doing physical work, carrying loads, displaying her physical charms and participating in all activities of life. The whole range of sculptural styles represent women of various classes the goddess, the demi-goddess or demons and earthly women. While considering the quality of their execution and the importance of the symbolic content, it can be ascertained that women in India enjoyed predominant position in the society.

The worship of mother goddess as the source of life and fertility has prehistoric roots, but the transformations of that deity into a great goddess of cosmic powers was achieved with the composition of *Devi Mahatmya* (glory of the goddess), a text of the 5<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> century, when worship of the female principle took on dramatic new dimensions. Images of Devi killing the buffalo demon Mahishasura, her most renowned feat, appeared across the country in caves and temples, in metal and stone, in clay and paint.

Portraying the actual battle between Devi and the forces of Mahishasura, a Pallava sculptor created a grand composition in a rock-cut granite cave at Mamallapuram in Tamilnadu in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Lithely poised on her lion with



her strung bow outstretched as she reaches into her quiver for an arrow, the graceful eight-armed goddess engages in combat aided by a host of female warriors and dwarf like *ganas*. While the battle is by no means over, the artist hints at the outcome in the retreating stance of the demon, portrayed as a gigantic man with a buffalo head, his warriors are also poised in the diagonal stance of retreat.

The story told in the *Devi Mahatmya* of the destruction of the demon brothers Nishumbha and Shumbha garnered much attention in the text, but was not popular with the artists. While temple patrons and devotees were apparently not overly inspired by the tale of Devi's destruction of these two demon brothers, they appear to have been entranced by the set of seven or eight mothers (*ashta matrikas*), the god's female counterparts (*shaktis*) who were created to assist her in this battle.

The *matrikas* as a group of seven to eight goddesses were venerated across the subcontinent; they seem to have been especially revered and vividly portrayed in the eastern state of Orissa. In Bhuvaneshwar they are depicted in the 7<sup>th</sup> century relief images carved on the exterior walls of the Parashurameshwar temple and on the interior walls of the shrine of the 8<sup>th</sup> century Vaital Deul temple. The series of image at the Vaital Deul temple is arranged so that the eight and the last figure, Chamunda or Chandika, is the shrine's central image.

From the 9<sup>th</sup> century artists began to enshrine *matrikas* as life-size images carved almost in the round. Two between the *matrikas*-sow-faced Varahi and skeletal Chamunda-were singled out for special worship in Orissa and were frequently enshrined in their own temple. At Chaurasi, in a 9<sup>th</sup> century temple dedicated to the goddess Varahi, (the *shakti* of Vishnu in his incarnation as the gigantic boar Varaha, who rescued the earth from the depths of the cosmic ocean), the sitting deity is depicted as a sow-faced, pot-bellied figure resting her pendant leg on her buffalo mount, which is carved against the pedestal. She holds a skull cup and a fish in her two hands, presented graphically in sculpture and painting across India.

All the three forms of Devi as Chamunda, Chamundi and Mahishasuramardhini are related to the attitude of vanquishing the evil and associated with the concept of war and action of killing, they have been interpreted in a distinctive manner with a specific purpose and iconography. The imagery is never mixed up and probably it is clearer when viewed in sequence. But in course of time all the forms of Devi is merging and generalising with the image of Durga, which has resulted in shedding the interesting and distinct identity of their own.

The Devi's *Sahasranama*, (one thousand names) includes these three forms separately. The divine power of all these three forms makes an interesting study. They incarnate spontaneous strength of uncontrollable intensity but not

dependent on the male counterpart. These feminine forms are the independent energy ignited with a specific power.

The manifestation of tendencies, the *guna*, in each of these forms makes them distinct from each other. The scriptures and legends associated with the imagery come out with splendid nature of the Immensity. These three forms applied in action display the From the 7<sup>th</sup> century on, goddess worship imbibed the esoteric *tantric* practise that spread across India and included the repetition of mantras; the use of *yantras*; the consumption of wine and blood of animals; and the performance of rituals. An important series of 17<sup>th</sup> century *tantric* paintings created in the Punjab hills and intended for Devi's meditation and devotional practice addresses her as auspicious Kali. The paintings generally, although not invariably, portray her as black in colour and with a full, firm body and fangs in her mouth. She often stands or sits upon a corpulent male corpse and is worshipped by the gods Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva and Indra.

The picture of the women in Indian art, which is indicated here only in outline, is one that developed over a period of several thousand of years in figure. In India the feminine divine is much elaborated in theory and has survived at societal level in vivid expressions of practices and forms. The concept is old as religion itself, the fundamental idea behind the feminine divine is that the Supreme Being, Creator of the worlds and people is seen as having a feminine aspect known generally as Shakti. Two traditions have strongly emerged, the *Shakta* and the *Tantra* traditions and the two are seen almost identical in the Indian feminine divine tradition.

The Indian feminine divine tradition is centered around the concept of The Mother. With all its aspects of fertility, nurturing, caring and giving, the feminine divine is seen as supreme with the attributes that are fundamental to human existence itself. The supreme mother known as Shakti (i.e. "power") or Maha Devi (i.e. 'the great goddess') takes various forms linked to principles of life, aspects and qualities where the feminine aspect is seen as dominant. Goddess Laksmi becomes the epitome of beauty and wealth, Goddess Saraswati being in charge with learning and wisdom. Similarly, Durga or Kali is the goddess warrior, but also takes on the characteristics of compassion and happiness. These are the main three goddesses in India there are elaborated festivities and worships that take place in order to propitiate the manifestations of the principles behind any goddess in one's life. The question is how relevant is the feminine divine in the Hindu society today.

*Tantra* has definitely shape the New Age movement as far as the divine feminine is concerned. It is primarily for the fact that according to the *tantric* literature women are custodians of this spiritual tradition, and only women can be Gurus, i.e. teachers of authority that are allowed to initiate into the lineage on *Tantra*. This fact undoubtedly makes *Tantra* the ultimate feminine expression of the New Age. There is no other tradition in the world that could bestow the scriptural authority to women to such extent as *Tantra*.

What is behind the *tantric* concept itself is the employing of human sexuality as means to spiritual liberation. The parity male-female (in *tantric* terminology Shiva-Shakti) consists of two poles of great potentiality allowing the awakening of *Kundalini* when certain condition is met. The result is the experience of liberation known under various names like *Samadhi*, *Moksha*, *Nirvana*, all related to a prolonged state of awareness that is the expression of refined human life experience. Elaborated techniques are employed along with ritual and secret practices as parts of the *tantric* philosophy of life.

Shakti, in the most powerful form of Kali, viewed as all pervading, kinetic principle is the ultimate phenomenon of the *tantric* phase in Indian art history. The worship of a mother goddess as the source of life and fertility has prehistoric roots, but the transformation of that deity into a Great goddess of cosmic powers was achieved with the composition of the *Devi Mahatmya* (Glory of the goddess), when worship of the female principle took on dramatic new dimensions.

Kali makes her 'official' debut in the *Devi-Mahatmya*, where she is said to have emanated from the brow of Goddess Durga (slayer of demons) during one of the battles between the divine and anti-divine forces. Etymologically Durga's name means "Beyond Reach". She is thus an echo of the woman warrior's fierce virginal autonomy. In this context Kali is considered the 'forceful' form of the great goddess Durga. For the lover and admirer of Indian civilization the representation of women in art will always be entitled to occupy a prominent place. The female form in art has to be viewed not just as art but also in connection with life. The Goddess Parvathi or Sri Llakshmi portrayed independently had designated role to play in her own domain. But they are also shown in most of the sculptural panels as the consorts, even carrying out the chores of an ordinary earthly woman.

Although portraits, especially those in painting are fairly often referred to in literature, none has been preserved from ancient times that could with certainty be designated as such. The occasional representation of the heroism of history, or of religious legends or of epic literature cannot be counted as true portraits because there could have been no genuine models for them.

All individual features are therefore missing and one can at best speak of ideal conceptions of these personalities, which lift them out of their surroundings and ascribe to them a certain attitude, certain garments and other details, and in this way build-up a distinctive type of figure with fixed outlines.

In principle, therefore the general rules for the representation of the women in Indian art hold good for the so-called portraits. The question of associating a system of idealized conceptions and a particular standard of values with a particular period or a particular region has to be discussed with plants and animals. Even a modern artist like Abanindranath Tagore compares the legs of women to the trunks of banana trees growing down to the soil, their eyes to the delicate and fugitive fish, hastening to and fro like wagtails, moist and

shimmering like lotus blossoms. Here movement alone seems significant, nothing is said about any single feature or characteristic trait, still less about any ugly details, which might have helped to identify some particular figure. In these comparisons the face forms only part of the image and not the most essential one. Time and a game the women's figure is given prominence, as well as her attitude and gestures; the characteristics of sex are usually given importance, female breast is compared to a cloud (payas) as the donor of fluid milk or water.

What has been said makes it clear that the representation of women in Indian art cannot be judged from an aesthetic point of view which takes the individual personality of the female figure as starting point; all discussions have to be based on generally valid conceptions of beauty comprising as well as the body of the women her jewels and garments, her movements and gestures.

It is not easy to pick out from a general Indian theory of beauty a special study of women, as there is no critical literature dealing with this particular subject. There exist, however a great number of theoretical works on Indian art, in particular on architecture, painting and sculpture. Sculpture and painting are very closely linked with dance and music in India: It has been said for example; " who ignores the rules of *citra* cannot understand the character of imagery. Without any knowledge of the dance it is difficult to understand the rules of *citra*, and the dance again cannot be understood without some knowledge of music.

As shown by literary sources the theory of the beauty of women in Indian art is chiefly concerned with the representation of female charms; it starts, however, from the anatomy of the female body and then goes on to the interpretation of the sexual attraction of women and their function with regard to fertility and mother hood. The effectiveness of the purely physically attributes is shown to be increased by attitudes, movements, and gestures, and jewellery and garments serve as a further attraction. But the main function of the attitudes and gestures is to show that variety of emotions and to indicate the ways in which they may be expressed with greater diversity. There is, for example, the characteristic attitude of the women, consisting of the threefold bend, the *tribhanga*-attitude, which displays particularly well the grace of the female body, though it can also be transferred to the man's body, where it appears as effeminate. Another typical movement which is often represented is the excessive protrusion –as it were vaulting –of the hips (*atibhanga*), used in particular by women carrying a child, but also by single figures without any special explanation through the significance of the image.

When we examine the process involved in the emergence of form, certain factors contribute in persuading an artist to conceptualise. The artist is influenced by the environment he comes from. In earlier times the artist inherited the artistic insight and inclination as the profession was on hereditary basis. The patronage offered directions to the artistic traditions. There was a serious involvement between the patron and artist in evolving the formations



despite canonical specifications. The urban milieu was much exposed to the religious influences.

India is a rich mine of tribal and folk art where women folk are directly or indirectly engaged themselves in creating the art for the ritual, functional or decorative purposes. It is interesting to note that anthropologically the artists draw the feminine forms from their own communities. The non-canonical forms emerged out of the freedom and limited scope of expression. These features are observed even in the classical periods also. Although the forms are repeating the physical features, costumes and jewellery change from one region to another. There is a striking difference between the female forms of Solanki sculptures of Gujarat and Chola sculpture of Southern region. Woman in all counts are sensuous, shapely and luscious and the memories of the artists have idealised in a platonic way.

The folk art without much complication such as the involvement of patrons, religious influences, canonical directions and artists of inheritance ushered simplicity of form. The folk art is characterized by the simplicity in treating the form. The technicality in handling the form is not prerequisite of a folk art. Thus the form is seen and perceived directly with the attributes required for the narrative contents. The Madhubani paintings from the agrarian town of Bihar has an astonishing objectivity in portraying female figures. The mother teaches the skill to the daughter. Thus women artist does these folk painting and they consciously bring out majority of female forms. They choose the theme, which are women oriented. Most of the houses in this area are painted with motifs, designs, birds perching and feminine figures capture the attention. But before the marriage the young maiden paint the wall of nuptial chamber with the intimate postures of female forms with their consorts or in the abstract forms of *linga* and *yoni*. The Kalamkari scroll painting (Andhra Pradesh), chitrakatha scroll paintings (Rajasthan) *patuas* (Bengal) portray the traditional Ramayana and Mahabharatha stories. These painting have the women in charming moods.

Besides folk art Indian paintings provide an aesthetic continuum that extends from the early civilization to the present day. This form of art in India is vivid and lively, refined and sophisticated and bold and vigorous at the same time. From being essentially religious in purpose in the beginning, Indian paintings have evolved over the years to become a fusion of various traditions, which influenced them. Every historical lineage has behind a testimony of the unique female form in all culture.

The Ajanta cave paintings are the greatest epoch of Indian classical art. The paintings illustrate the development of Indian Buddhist art from Hinayana themes to Mahayana ideals. Some caves are entirely devoted to illustrations from the Jatakas, the many lives of the Buddha to be. The decorative panels present a typical collection of ornamental designs incorporating flowers, fruits, plants and animals. The scenes from court life, the jewelled ornaments and textiles are a



source for study of the material culture of India during a particular period in its history.

Ajanta women have narrow waists and round hips; breasts are exaggerated, the faces are round and smiling. The depiction of the female form has been influenced by descriptions in the classical Sanskrit works. Benjamin Rowland writes as follows, "The swelling nubile breast, the tiny waist hardly greater in girth than the neck, the shapely tapered arms and exquisitely flower-like hands-these are all elements of the canon that determined the types of physical beauty in the cave shrines in India. Here these charms are even more provocative, through exaggeration. "In spite of obvious reality one feels at Ajanta that Woman is treated not as an individual, but as principle. She is there not female merely, but the incarnation of all the beauty of the world. Hence with all her gaiety, her charm, her insouciance, she never loses her dignity, and nowhere is she belittled or besmirched.

Apart from portraying woman in positive roles such as goddess, mother, consort, Devi, danseuse, celestial, etc, we come across with the depiction of feminine form in negative roles such as a bad step mother, mistress, vamp, etc. Among all the social evils that she was closely associated were the *sati*, *purdha* system and treatment of widowhood. All these three are indirectly linked and consequential. In medieval times, large number of *sati* stones, were installed with the portrayal of hands of the victims give an impression that the custom had become more common due to continuous warfare between the Mughal and Rajput forces. The mass self-immolation of women of the warriors known as *jauhar* was more prevalent in Rajasthan and Malwa. One of the unfortunate true happening was *Jauhar* organised at the instance of the queen Chittor Padmini. Chittor has witnessed such ghastly situation three times and the Rajput paintings of the period celebrate the heroic qualities of the warriors and the women who willingly follow their husbands through *sahagaman*, entering the burning fire.

During Mughal times woman was veiled and lost her vital identity, which was gained through the long process from pre-historic times. Man to protect his woman from the evil spell of other man over raided her rights confining to the four walls and the woman without an alternative accepted the *purdha* system. The practice of polygamy, having several wives was unquestioned only encouraged the *harem* and the position of women had reached the lowest ebb in the context of social equality. The miniature painting schools like Mughal and Rajasthani give us the picture of such *zenanas*.

Colonial India has witnessed changing trends in the approach towards life of woman. Her emancipation in the field of education and opportunity to step out of the house unveiled her capabilities. The visiting British artists found Indian woman in her multiple roles and costumes as interesting subject to portray only next to Indian landscape. First time in India woman was portrayed in a realistic manner down to earth types in her natural self while considering her portrayal in sculpture and paintings of early times. Under the influence of British artists the

Indian artists also began to treat the feminine form in their works as she appeared to them. Portraits of court dancers, queens, milkmaids, fruit sellers, village belles, women worshipping in the temples etc found place in the art compositions.

Raja Ravi Varma, the celebrated artist of late 19<sup>th</sup> century immortalised feminine beauty in his mythological works. The Indian film industry found the ideal type heroine from the art works of Ravi Varma. There was also a strong emotional and moral rhetoric in turn of the century art practice. Through theatre, film and even the western academic painting tradition, the national idol that came to be perpetuated had its own distinct role for women. (Expressions and Evocations – MARG, Ed by Gayatri Sinha) Most of the feminine characters of Ravi Varma are bejewelled conforming to the high status they belonged. This was a transitional phase in Indian visual art be it painting or sculpture, or even the literature.

At this juncture Indian artists had to face challenges in treating feminine form moving away from mythic, historical and western idiom to true 'Indian' imagery of the times. Through this exercise emerged the figurative form of Bharatmata, as the symbol of sacrifice, tied her in the yoke and struggling to liberate. The nationalist movement in Bengal once again idealised the feminine form going back to the feminine principles of Indian tradition even though the social status of woman was drastically changing. The spiritual contents resurfaced in the Bengal school artists. The early trace of participation of women in the art activities of the times is attributed to the Bengal Renaissance as the women too have expressed nationalist concern. The earliest evidence of woman artists in colonial India is the art exhibition held in Calcutta in 1879, in which 25 amateur women artists took part. In the early twentieth century Tagore's niece Sunayani Devi, who was a housewife, won celebrity status as a naïve artist. (Indian Art by Partha Mitter).

The art schools established by British trained Indian artists in academic realism. The life study as part of art education has pulled the artists from the idealistic notions to real life situation. They studied the female form with the same interest as male or animal forms. The artists of Bombay Progressive group, Calcutta and Madras produced a large number of artists and some took feminine form seriously as the theme of their expression. There was a clean shift from mere using the female form to the issue based concern. Several social issues caught the imagination of the artists and the pre-occupation of feminine form is slowly relegated to shadow. In the contemporary scene seldom references can be attributed to the artists who are committed to the female forms as their expression. The whole perception of art is changing so radically, that the abstract forms and installation, of objectification of the concepts, may replace the figurative formula itself.

In the wake of modern art movement in India the colonial art was outlasted and the female forms receive a fresh treatment of concern by the female

artists. Rabindranath Tagore emerged as the first modern artist in India paving a way for bold expression of themes and forms. His female portraits endowed with radical power of imagination set the freedom of choice in articulating the feminine form. Amrita Sher-Gil was the first professional woman artist of India (1931-41). After returning to India from Paris completing her art education, she committed herself with the expression of poor, mute, unsung Indian women sharing with remarkable strength and tenacity. The presence of self is first time attained in her works. She stands as the symbol of feminine identity in her works.

But the post-independent period in India is filled with vibrancy and the male artists dominated the central stage of Indian modern art movement. The artists from Bombay, Calcutta, Shantiniketan, Delhi, Baroda, and Madras have enjoyed themselves in portraying women with great ease and vivacity. Here also like earlier instances she was an object of pleasure as in the works of Souza, or simple village belles in Hebbar's paintings, distinguishing forms such as Saraswati, Mother Teresa or Indira Gandhi in Hussain's works. But K.G. Subramanian's female faces express 'rasas', the emotional states stand as outstanding examples for the treatment of feminine forms in contemporary art.

Between Amrita Sher-Gil and Anjoli Ela Menon (the contemporary woman artist) the saga of search for identity is all pervading in the works of the women artists who fell in this bracket of time. They have formed as self-conscious group responding to the women's movement of 1970s. We cannot categorise them as 'feminist' but it may not be out of place that we can frame under 'Indian Feminism'. This new generation of artists are trying consciously to explore the very existence of woman in the fast changing society and her perception of society. Meera Mukherji, Anjoli Ela Menon, Nalini Malani, Arpana Kaur, Rekha Rodwatie, Manu Parekh, Pushpamala and a large number of emerging women artists are attending to the question of their own identity. They are bold and direct, like to make their presence felt in their works. Their inner voices are powerfully put forth through the visual language, which is taking an interesting place in Indian art movement. There is a great resurgence of the women artists in a big way since a decade. The emergence of female forms with a tremendous force is a deliberate and sensitive expression of women artists and 'woman would know woman better, prevails in this context.

The picture of the women in Indian art, which is indicated here only in outline, is one that developed over a period of several thousand of years in figural art, literary parallels, and theoretical notions. Any admirer of Indian culture finds always fascinating about the phenomenon of the representation of women in art. As a conclusion it can be stated that the feminine qualities reaches the status of divine since the dawn of humanity. Indian art and literature have documented these tangible various forms of Indian womanhood. Over the history of humanity many ideas have emerged lending a new vision of feminine perspective. It is well indicated that this has opened new horizons for women and their active participation in the journey human understanding.



Mother Goddess - Indus Valley.

Mother Goddess - Indus Valley



Didarganj Yakshi - N. Suryan.



FIGURE 10.1. THE IDEAL FEMALE FORM IN THE AJANTA PAINTINGS

Female Ideal in Ajanta Paintings

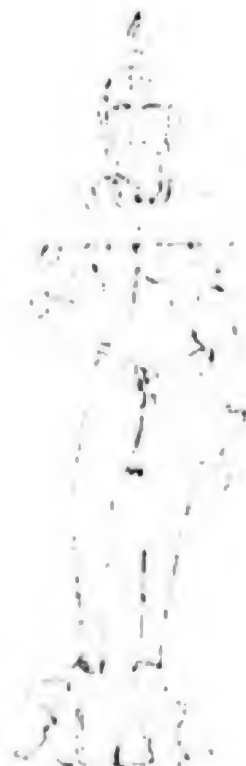


FIGURE 10.2. THE IDEAL FEMALE FORM IN THE CHOLA BRONZE

Form of Devi-Chola Bronze





FEMININE BEAUTY IN MINIATURE PAINTINGS

Feminine Beauty in Miniature Paintings



A Celestial Musician

A Celestial Musician



A Temple Dancer  
A Temple Dancer



The Earthy Feminine Form  
The Earthy Feminine Form





